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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

26 April 1983

The Philippines: Update on the Communist Insurgency

Summary

The rapid growth of the Communist insurgency over the past year, particularly on Mindanao, has heightened concern in the government, but Manila has yet to develop a successful strategy to counter the Communist Party of the Philippines's New People's Army (CPP-NPA). Pilot joint military-civic action programs have not worked and a new program designed to improve the military's relations with the rural populace shows little promise of succeeding, in our view. [redacted]

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Renewed violence in the southern Philippines by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) or stepped up cooperation between the CPP-NPA and the Muslim rebels would magnify Manila's predicament because troop redeployments on Mindanao in response to NPA violence leave force levels in Muslim areas the lowest they have been in several years. [redacted]

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Although the insurgencies are not an immediate threat to the government, we believe Communist rebel activity may dissuade President Marcos from loosening his control over political activity, and could interfere in some areas with Manila's ability to hold legislative elections in May 1984. Manila may also have to make a decision on whether to increase the size of its armed forces to contain the growing level of violence. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Malaysia, Singapore, Islands Branch, Southeast Asia Division, Office of East Asian Analysis. It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Council. Comments are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Southeast Asia Division, [redacted]

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The National Setting

During the past year the Communist Party of the Philippines's New People's Army (CPP-NPA) made significant political and military gains. [REDACTED]

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Military activity increased in the Western Visayas, where the CPP had been concentrating on front group activity. [REDACTED]

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In addition to increasing its military activity, the CPP-NPA escalated its organization and propaganda activities nationwide. The CPP reorganized its national party structure by increasing to five the number of party commissions that direct and coordinate political and military activities across regional party committee boundaries. The party also has expanded to 15 the number of regional party committees, up from 13 a year ago. A similar party reorganization on Mindanao in 1980 preceded the increase in military activity there, and we believe the strengthened party structure is likely to affect the pace of rebel expansion in other parts of the country, where party commissions are new or are only now being organized. [REDACTED]

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Increasing Activity on Mindanao: Perhaps most worrisome to Manila is the increase in NPA activity on Mindanao. According to Philippine press reports, company-size operations are increasingly being carried out on Mindanao, a marked contrast to the NPA's earlier squad-size attacks. In January 1983 a group estimated at 200 guerrillas attacked a Philippine Constabulary

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company headquarters in Mabini, Davao del Norte, escaping with 158 rifles, ammunition, medical supplies, and uniforms. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] recent incidents represent more sophisticated operations than have been seen to date and, in our judgment, reflect better rebel training. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] of an NPA training site on Mindanao that includes obstacle courses and rudimentary target ranges. In the [REDACTED] this training area was set up by an individual who was exposed to more elaborate formal military training facilities, suggesting either external training, successful NPA recruitment among discharged Philippine Army draftees, or the existence of such training sites elsewhere in the Philippines. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] In our judgment, the NPA is having considerable success because the local economy is suffering from depressed commodity prices and, more recently, a severe drought. In November 1982, businessmen in Davao City complained to visiting US Embassy officials that retail sales were down 30-40 percent from the previous year, the third straight year of a decline of over 20 percent.* [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] a second, but as yet less successful, NPA tactical objective is to isolate the Zamboanga Peninsula in southwestern Mindanao in order to cause

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economic dislocation. An army battalion commander and six soldiers were killed in this area in an NPA ambush early this year, and it is also where [redacted] the NPA is currently concentrating its recruitment and organization work. If the CPP-NPA recruitment drive is successful in this area, it will test Manila's assumption, implicit in its recent troop redeployments, that southwestern Mindanao will remain relatively calm in the near term. [redacted]

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Party Organizing On Mindanao

The upswing in insurgent activity on Mindanao, in our judgment, represents a strategic shift by the CPP away from its longstanding stronghold in the Visayas because of the unique opportunities Mindanao offers. [redacted]

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[redacted] Local grievances regarding the land tenure system and the encroachment of agribusinesses-- issues the Communists exploit--are also more pronounced on Mindanao than elsewhere in the Philippines. State Department reporting indicates that the NPA's arms procurement and financing efforts on Mindanao have been relatively successful. [redacted]

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According

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*Benjamin de Vera escaped from jail last year. [redacted]

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[redacted]
to [redacted] each guerrilla front is responsible for maintaining a regional guerrilla unit of approximately 100 armed, full-time guerrillas, with each combination of two fronts required to jointly develop another unit of 100 rebels. If the CPP-NPA is fully meeting these goals, [redacted]

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[redacted] there would be approximately 2,100 fulltime guerrillas on Mindanao, [redacted]
[redacted]

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Although insurgent activity has increased on Mindanao, the CPP may be falling short of its objectives. [redacted]

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Manila's Response: Manila has responded rapidly to the deteriorating security situation on Mindanao. Five battalions were redeployed primarily from southwestern Mindanao to the Davao region. A combat-tested marine battalion was also moved to Mindanao from Luzon, where it had been in training. As a result, the number of combat battalions deployed against the NPA on Mindanao currently stands at 16. This means that nationally 50 percent of Philippine combat units are now directed against the Communist insurgency; in 1979, 75 percent were committed against the Muslims. [redacted]

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Manila is also taking longer term steps to improve the security situation in eastern Mindanao:

- The Southern Command has relieved the Philippine Constabulary--known for its poor human rights record--of its operational combat responsibilities on Mindanao,

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- A new operational plan redesignated the tactical areas of operational responsibility of the Philippine military commands in an effort to improve their command and control system and direct counterinsurgency operations more effectively.

- President Marcos issued a directive to the military to coordinate the government's civilian and military response to the NPA, as part of a nationwide civic action program. Under this plan, civic relations teams consisting of medical personnel are to be sent to baranqays (rural villages) affected by the NPA.

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- General Delfin Castro, head of the Southern Command, has established an advance command post in Davao City that has boosted public confidence in the government, according to US officials who visited the area recently.

Manila's Ability to Cope...

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...On Mindanao--

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Manila's forces in southwestern Mindanao are stretched thin, and the recent redeployment of troops to eastern Mindanao has left the Zamboanga Peninsula more vulnerable. As such, the Communists may shift their operations to the 'throat' of the Zamboanga Peninsula in line with the party's stated objective to 'choke off' the area. The Communists will continue their efforts to undermine local confidence in the government, and we believe they will be able to exploit the current sense of frustration of local officials. According to US Embassy officials, there is a 'palpable sense of drift' among local community leaders on Mindanao, who admit that they are stymied by the insurgency problem.

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The pace of CPP-NPA expansion on Mindanao will be even more difficult for Manila to control if the Communists establish a tactical alliance with the Muslim rebels or if the MNLF on its own renews violence in the south (See Appendix). If either--or both--occur, it will put increased pressures on the Philippine military and probably require the redeployment of troops from Luzon or the Visayas. [REDACTED]

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...Nationwide-- We do not expect the NPA will be in a position to overthrow the government in the next few years. Significantly larger rebel operations may force the government to consider increasing the size of its military forces, however, which doubled to approximately 160,000 during martial law (1972-81). In the short run, Manila is redirecting its military purchases in favor of counterinsurgency-related equipment. This is in line with a presidential directive issued to the military in mid-1982. The latest list of proposed Foreign Military Sales purchases seen by the US Embassy in Manila, for example, focuses on helicopters, ground transportation, and communications equipment--all of which are necessary to improve counterinsurgency operations. [REDACTED]

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Manila's flexibility to redeploy troops is limited because rebel activity is continuing in other parts of the country. On Samar, for example, where Manila publicly cites improvements in its counterinsurgency effort, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] According to Brigadier General Mison, the commanding general in the area, NPA ambushes have increased and citings of guerrillas are now occurring on a regular basis in populated areas. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] to the local people and described the situation as "at worst a military stalemate." Because large numbers of troops remain tied down on Samar and in the Bicol region of southern Luzon, some military officials claim they need an additional 6 to 10 battalions to keep pace with Communist expansion nationwide. [REDACTED]

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Pending Decisions

In our judgment, Manila must fashion a counterinsurgency strategy that deals with the root causes of the insurgencies in

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the face of seemingly intractable problems, including a deep recession, military abuses, and an inefficient judicial system. Manila's latest effort at a comprehensive program is Operation Katatagan (Firmness)--a nationwide civic action campaign to improve military relations with the local population. The program is designed to gain popular support for Manila's counterinsurgency drive by improving coordination between military and civilian authorities and more closely linking rural economic development with counterinsurgency strategies. A similar military-civic action program designed for the Bicol region of southern Luzon last spring was supposed to provide a model for the rest of the country but was unsuccessful and has since been abandoned, according to US Embassy officials, in part because of military abuses. [redacted]

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Operation Katatagan will not succeed, in our view, until Manila comes to grips with the problem of military abuses, which is frequently cited by Philippine officials among others as a major cause of CPP-NPA success. This means reining in errant Philippine Constabulary and Army units. Marine units have maintained excellent relations with the local population but their role in counterinsurgency operations, although growing, is still relatively small. [redacted]

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The problem of military abuses has intensified interservice rivalries over which branch of the armed forces should have primary responsibility for counterinsurgency operations. [redacted]

[redacted] whose abuse of civilians is legion, should be relieved of an active role in counterinsurgency operations. Although a step in this direction was taken on Mindanao when General Castro relieved the Constabulary of its combat role, as yet there are no signs that this policy will be extended to the rest of the country. Politically, it would be difficult to do so in our judgment because such a step would reflect badly on Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Fidel Ramos, who is head of the Constabulary and highly regarded in the military. [redacted]

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Containing military abuses alone will not resolve the insurgency problem, however. [redacted]

[redacted] A recovery in major agricultural export prices, such as sugar and coconut products, will at best ameliorate conditions for roughly half the population that depends either directly or indirectly on these crops for their livelihood. Over the longrun, Manila must wean the agricultural sector away from dependence on these commodities, [redacted]

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which face new competition on world markets from substitutes such as other edible oils and high fructose corn sweeteners. [REDACTED]

In addition to meeting the military threat posed by the Communists in rural areas, Manila will have to respond to the party's plans to step up recruitment activities in urban centers through its National Democratic Front. The 1982 revised National Democratic Front charter describes the CPP's plans to develop urban support among labor, students, professionals, and the Church. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Marcos's concern over increased political activities of the CPP, moreover, may delay political liberalization, in our judgment. As it is, the CPP-NPA's recent military successes will make the holding of legislative elections next year difficult in some parts of the country. Governor Homobono Adaza, an opposition politician on Mindanao, has already expressed his concerns to US officials that the National Assembly elections scheduled for May 1984 will probably have to be deferred in a number of areas because of insurgent violence, much the way that barangay elections in 1982 in some areas were not held because of security reasons. In our view, the recent CPP-NPA gains may see Manila increasingly trapped in a vicious circle over the next year--as the insurgency worsens, security concerns will dissuade Marcos from loosening his political grip, which in turn will provide fuel for CPP propaganda and recruitment efforts. [REDACTED]

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Appendix: The Muslim Factor

Prospects for MNLF-NPA Cooperation

Until recently, [redacted] the level of cooperation between the MNLF and the NPA was low--limited to occasional training and coordination in areas where both groups operate. Nonetheless, recent events on Mindanao have led Philippine government officials to express concern over the possibility of increasing cooperation between the two insurgent forces. In our view, increases in the geographic scope of such cooperation are likely, considering the sharply increased level of NPA activity on Mindanao and the expansion of Communist military activity into traditionally Muslim areas in the south. A strong alliance on the national level, however, would be difficult to maintain because of religious differences, in our judgment. [redacted]

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[redacted] but concur that it is an issue of serious concern.

[redacted] a high level of cooperation already exists between the MNLF and the NPA on Mindanao but is hardpressed to supply any solid evidence of a formal alliance. [redacted]

[redacted] while an

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accommodation may have been reached at a high level, significant tactical cooperation between the guerrillas is unlikely. As far as we can tell a national-level agreement between the MNLF and the NPA has not been reached. [REDACTED]

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Prospects for Renewed MNLF Fighting

Government redeployment has weakened the military's position in southwestern Mindanao and several other areas affected by the currently dormant Muslim insurgency. Maintaining the new troop dispositions, however, depends on whether the Muslim rebellion remains dormant. [REDACTED]

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Insurgent Gains on Mindanao [REDACTED]

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